



U.S. EPA's Western Ecology Division Mourns Loss of Long-time Associate and Friend, Ray Bentley

Veteran USFWS pilot and biologist Vernon "Ray" Bentley and his passenger Dave Pitkin died on Sunday, January 17, 2010 when their single-engine Cessna went down in a wooded area west of Philomath, Oregon.

The two were returning from a day spent flying over estuaries in Oregon and Washington, counting ducks, geese and swans for the US Fish and Wildlife Service's annual mid-winter waterfowl survey.



photo by Eric Vance, US EPA

Bentley had worked closely with Western Ecology Division since 1985; first as an on-site contractor until the early 1990's, when he went to work for the USFWS, and again in the early 2000's, as a pilot.



Through aerial reconnaissance flights with Ray, scientists and natural resource managers were able to gain a big picture perspective of the ecosystems they are studying and managing, which could not be had at ground level.

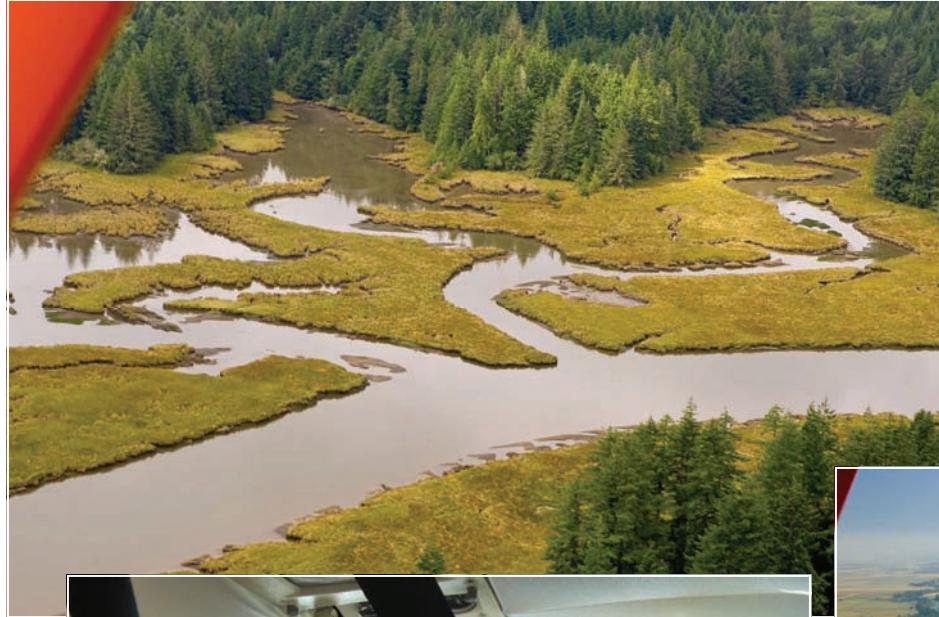


Aloft with Ray Bentley

Ray Bentley and his bright orange Cessna were well known around the Willamette Valley.

He was a pilot and biologist doing work for the US Fish and Wildlife Service, but he wore many "hats". Scientists at WED often counted on Bentley to get people and cameras and other equipment airborne.

Over the years, Ray flew numerous WED passengers (both scientists and natural resource managers) over the Willamette Valley, Coast Range and Newport coastal area.



Read transcript of an oral history given by Ray in 2005 detailing his career [click here](#)



This is a picture (*above*) I took from the flight I went on with Ray last August with the EPA photographer and writer from Headquarters (Eric Vance and Aaron Ferster). Photographer Vance is in passenger seat, at right.

—Scott Leibowitz

WED Colleagues Recall Bentley's Extraordinary Life

I flew with Ray a number of times to conduct research or to conduct tours of the Willamette basin to visiting scientists and natural resource managers. Ray was an amazing source of aviation and natural history information. His love of flying and of natural systems was evident. He was always incredibly professional in his flying. He was an amazing pilot.

I am still shocked that he is gone.

—Jim Wigington



Ray was ever-willing to patiently share and teach what he knew -- and he arrived at what he knew through careful observation and thought.

He was also always curious, and willing to hear out new ideas or learn new things; that combination of teacher/student impressed me very much.

He was fun and encouraging company; I'll miss his dry, wry, humor and remember how much he loved wildlife, wilderness and flying.

—Kevin Djang

I have known Ray for 25 years and flown with him in western Oregon, so this comes as a shock to me because he was a careful pilot and took excellent care of his plane. He often said that his true loves were flying and wildlife biology, so he died doing what he enjoyed most, but like all who knew him, I will miss his wonderful smile and enthusiasm for life.

--Bob Hughes

We had the pleasure of meeting Ray Bentley during a visit to the Western Ecology Division labs in Corvallis and Newport in August of 2009. He took us on two flights to photograph and document ongoing EPA research from the air.

Thanks to the skill, professionalism, and patience of our pilot, we landed with a portfolio of several hundred aerial photographs to support science and outreach, a far better understanding of EPA ecosystems services research, and a deeper appreciation of the spirit of collaboration between EPA and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Thanks to Ray's quick smile and generous spirit, the trip was both fruitful and fun. It was the highlight of a great week, and we both feel fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with him.

Eric Vance
EPA Chief Photographer

Aaron Ferster
Lead Science Writer
EPA Office of Research and Development

Aaron describes his flight with Ray and his trip on the EPA blog, [Greenversations](#)



Aaron Ferster was seated behind Ray and took this picture of photographer Eric Vance working the camera.

Eric Vance took all aerial photos on these pages.

WED Colleagues Recall Bentley's Extraordinary Life



Ray Bentley was a dedicated wildlife biologist who was also a skilled small aircraft pilot for the US Fish & Wildlife Service. His office on the second floor of JSB (WED/Corvallis) was filled with pictures from the field, flight manuals, maps, electronic equipment and survey logs.

Ray typically spent 3 weeks each August in Alberta, Canada, training and leading waterfowl banding crews. They trapped birds during their flightless molting stage and banded them, gathering information vital to understanding migration patterns and waterfowl natural history.

His main job was flying aerial surveys of waterfowl, but he also tracked whales, eagles, snakes and other wildlife that had been implanted with radio transmitters.

*Photo, top left:
Ray Bentley on a frosty morning this past December in Eastern Oregon after rough camping with long time friend, Jake Overton of New Zealand. The two were in pursuit of chukar.*

Photo by Jake Overton.

The small orange USFWS plane that he routinely flew had greater power and speed capabilities than it appeared, and Ray spent countless hours keeping abreast of new avionics (instrumentation) and operational requirements along with safety checks and training flights.

He was not infrequently called on short notice to fly law enforcement officers to conduct aerial reconnaissance of suspected fish and game violators.

The line between work and play for Ray was not well defined. He spent much of his off-time pursuing fish and wildlife for recreation, and took great pride in his ability to get close to game. He flew his own plane to SE Alaska to spend time visiting his father, camping and fishing in near pristine environments.

He loved to go out on the Willamette River in the pre-dawn hours, alone, in his 14' skiff and 10 hp prop motor in search of ducks. He was quite closed-mouthed about where exactly he would go, but the self-portrait images he took documented his successful forays.

Ray lived simply and would rather fix a good piece of equipment that had worn out than throw it away and purchase another one. He heated his rural home with firewood he cut and hauled - warming himself at least twice in the process.

The bulk of Ray's survey work was along the Canadian-US border from N. Dakota to Washington, flying tedious transects and identifying birds while flying the plane at 100 to 300 feet above the ground. This data was vital to both nations in tracking waterfowl spatial and temporal population trends, and setting annual harvest limits.

It was amazing to drive with Ray along I-84 in the Columbia Gorge and have him identify and quantify the different species of ducks and geese so far distant that they looked like specks to the casual observer.

Ray was the kind of man who would lend a hand in any difficult situation and he often did. He was an independent spirit who took great pride in his interactions with the environment and its wild inhabitants at multiple levels.

He is the kind of friend, colleague and co-worker that will be greatly missed and remembered.

—Dixon Landers



Bentley in his plane; photo by Roy Lowe, USFWS